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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TBILISI 000143

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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA, AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#) [RU](#)
SUBJECT: DAS BRYZA MEETS WITH OPPOSITION

REF: TBILISI 88

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On January 19, EUR DAS Matt Bryza and Ambassador Tefft met with key leaders of the United National Council of Opposition (UNC). The UNC's main contention was that Mikheil Saakashvili did not receive 50 percent of the vote in the January 5 election. Consequently, they said they and their supporters did not recognize Saakashvili as the legitimate President. The UNC alleged the election was falsified through the alteration of election protocols after the polls closed. Although they offered no proof, they contended that this was widely known and that the people now trust neither Saakashvili nor the system. The UNC also criticized the U.S. for statements which they believed legitimized an illegitimate win. Although they purported to be against revolution, each leader underscored the seriousness of the current situation. The leaders alleged a rise in anti-Americanism, which they attributed to perceived American support for the ruling party. Bryza responded that the U.S. carefully reviewed the findings from its own observation teams, compared them with others from the international community, and only then did President Bush call Saakashvili to congratulate him on his election. Bryza countered that the anti-Americanism was also being fueled by some members of the opposition.

12. (C) After the meeting, Bryza met separately with Usupashvili. Usupashvili underscored the seriousness of the situation facing Saakashvili and his United National Movement party (UNM). He said the UNC is also working through internal dissension, trying to move forward for the parliamentary elections. Bryza then met with presidential candidate and New Rightists (NR) Party Chairman, MP David Gamkrelidze (not a UNC member.) Gamkrelidze echoed UNC concerns regarding Saakashvili's "illegitimate victory" and unjust UNM control of public institutions. His NR party is joining the UNC in protesting the election results. All opposition leaders agreed that truly fair parliamentary elections are the only way out of the current situation. End Summary.

United Opposition Refuses to Recognize Saakashvili Win

13. (C) On January 19, EUR DAS Matt Bryza and Ambassador Tefft met with key leaders of the United National Council of Opposition (UNC), a bloc of eight opposition parties. UNC presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze, Republican Party Chairman David Usupashvili, Georgia's Way Leader Salome Zourabichvili, and Conservative MP Kakha Kukava represented the UNC. Gachechiladze alleged that Saakashvili did not win over 50 percent of the vote. He contended that the election was falsified through the alteration of election protocols after the polls closed. Although the opposition leaders

offered no proof, they contended that this was widely known and that the people now trust neither Saakashvili nor the system.

Private Negotiations, Public Protests

¶4. (C) Gachechiladze turned to Usupashvili on how the UNC is responding to the situation. Usupashvili said he is leading talks with Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze. He said they could not negotiate directly with Saakashvili until after the Spring parliamentary elections because of the public mistrust. He said the opposition's concerns are focused on the Central Election Commission (CEC), Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), the courts, and oversight of police. He said the opposition believes that Saakashvili's control of these public institutions allowed him to take the election, and contends that real opposition influence (as opposed to "parity") in each of these public institutions is critical to restore public trust in government. Usupashvili said the current imbalance of power in the country cannot be corrected without such influence.

¶5. (C) At the same time, Gachechiladze said the UNC is continuing public protests against Saakashvili while they formulate their platform for the parliamentary election. (Note: An UNC protest was held on January 20 immediately after the Presidential Inauguration ceremony. End note.) Gachechiladze expressed concern about being able to rein in public fervor against Saakashvili. Usupashvili said the UNC hopes to present good solutions to the public in the coming weeks.

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Fair Elections Only Solution

¶6. (C) The four opposition leaders agreed that only one solution exists out of the current gridlock. First, the USG and European partners must hold Saakashvili and the UNM accountable to any signed agreement resulting from negotiations with Burjanadze. Second, the coming parliamentary election must be truly fair. This means the UNM must be willing to accept defeat at the polls, should that happen.

¶7. (C) None of the opposition leaders, however, were convinced that Saakashvili would allow a UNM parliamentary loss. They gloomily predicted open revolt should Saakashvili and the UNM refuse to accept possible defeat and "take the election" through extraordinary means.

DAS Bryza Looks Ahead

¶8. (C) DAS Bryza and the Ambassador reiterated that the Embassy looked very hard at the election results before the USG acknowledged Saakashvili had won. More than a week passed between election day and President Bush's congratulatory call. They said the opposition must acknowledge Saakashvili's legitimacy at some point. Bryza said that such a thin victory on January 5 was a strong message to Saakashvili (on the need to reconnect with civil society and common citizens) and Georgia's neighbors (on the legitimacy of a presidential victory with 52 percent rather than 65 or 85 percent of the vote.) Bryza also pointed out that despite the opposition's claims, he never made a statement legitimizing the January 5 election. Rather, he was careful to note that "if the January 5 election is determined to have been free and fair, then all Georgians will have an obligation to honor the will of the Georgian voter, whether they like the results or not. But if the

election is determined to have been neither free nor fair, then Georgia would find itself in a situation analogous to that of November 2003." Zourabichvili contended the media presented his interview in a manner that led Georgians to believe Bryza supported a Saakashvili win. Bryza responded that he could not control the media, and that the opposition themselves (i.e. with their "Bryza Museum of Lies" promoted by MP Zviad Dzidziguri) also shared some responsibility for driving anti-American sentiment. (Note: Following the meeting with Bryza, Zourabichvili castigated the Georgian media for twisting Bryza's previous comments on the election out of context. End Note.)

¶9. (C) Bryza agreed with the group that "much better" parliamentary elections are necessary and that the USG will strongly support such a push with the GOG. Bryza pointed out that he and the Embassy had been working very hard to restore Imedi TV and some balance in Georgia's television coverage. He further noted the USG's longstanding message to Saakashvili that to strengthen democracy, the GOG needed to cultivate - not just tolerate - a loyal political opposition. Bryza also said that Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia in NATO is unlikely to be awarded at the Bucharest Summit. Bryza stated that truly fair parliamentary elections are key to putting Georgia back on track for MAP.

Usupashvili: Fractures in UNC; Saakashvili Under Pressure

¶10. (C) In a following, private meeting, Usupashvili told DAS Bryza that UNC member Koba Davitashvili and his People's Party would protest at the Embassy on January 22 (reftel). Usupashvili said Davitashvili ignored the will of the rest of the UNC, despite a unanimous vote against him. Usupashvili stressed that the UNC does not support any anti-American protests. He said this public division of the UNC is bad for its responsible members. Bryza thanked Usupashvili for the advance notice of the protest at the Embassy and acknowledged Davitashvili's right to protest in a free democracy.

¶11. (C) Usupashvili cautioned that there is also division and pressure within the UNM. He assessed that Saakashvili did not expect to lose Kakheti or Tbilisi. Usupashvili said Saakashvili had to rely on populist pledges on social security and other welfare programs to secure 53 percent of the vote. Usupashvili believed that such promises could not be kept. Usupashvili said it would help if Burjanadze were stronger, as she could then exert greater influence via Parliament and in the UNM. Due to these conflicting obligations, Usupashvili thought Saakashvili may fear an

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opposition victory in the next election will mean his end. If Saakashvili reacts, by cracking down on the opposition for example, then it could turn bad in the country. Usupashvili said everyone in the UNC is against recognizing Saakashvili as the president. However, he added that civil disobedience is still being debated. Usupashvili said he is ready to do whatever he can to help temper the opposition's response. "But it's not easy," he said. "We are trying to calm people down."

¶12. (C) Compounding matters, Usupashvili said that some in the UNM oppose ceding any influence at all in the CEC, GPB, courts, or police to the opposition. Usupashvili said the people will not trust another election without some oversight of the police. He was unsure whether the public trust can be restored at all under Saakashvili. He thought that even if significant personnel changes were made within the Justice Ministry and Supreme Court it may not be enough.

¶13. (C) Usupashvili said his own Republican Party will have a committee meeting in two weeks to prepare language and ideas for the coming election. Usupashvili is hoping that the UNC can also move forward to the parliamentary elections. He

pointed out that truly fair parliamentary elections were his party's initial demand last year. He thought that the people would not tolerate another perceived unfair election. DAS Bryza acknowledged the division in society, but agreed with Usupashvili that Georgia needs an election now, not a fight.

Gamkrelidze: Same Fears, Same Problems

¶14. (C) MP Gamkrelidze also met DAS Bryza privately on January 19. He echoed that the election may have restored Saakashvili's international legitimacy, but it had not restored his legitimacy with the Georgian public. He said that most people in the cities don't think Saakashvili won. Gamkrelidze said he was unsure whether he could convince his supporters that the next elections will be fair.

¶15. (C) Gamkrelidze appealed to Bryza to support "real elections" and not just "international standards." Gamkrelidze said that the opposition must have influence on policy in the CEC, GPB, and the judiciary. He suggested that possibly a new Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or High Council of Justice could help restore people's trust in their votes. Gamkrelidze also suggested in a meeting to Burjanadze that it might help if Gachechiladze could run in a direct election for Tbilisi Mayor. The Ambassador said Saakashvili had already refused this idea. Gamkrelidze said trouble would ensue unless some balance of power is restored in the government.

¶16. (C) Gamkrelidze said he is unsure as to what the NR will do regarding the parliamentary elections, whether or not, for example, NR may combine with another party. Gamkrelidze said that the NR is supporting the UNC in its public protests, but will continue to abide by its long-standing commitment to non-violence. His party also will not support any anti-American protests. DAS Bryza noted that Gamkrelidze has always followed his own lead, and that this may be a good time to continue doing so. If the situation continues, Gamkrelidze said it would be ripe for exploitation by a revolutionary. He said former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili (now facing extradition in France) was hoping to exploit just such a situation.

¶17. (C) Gamkrelidze said that Saakashvili brought about the current situation. Because Saakashvili continually weakened the reasonable opposition, he said, now only vocal, aggressive voices are heard. DAS Bryza agreed this was exactly his point. Bryza said he would make the same point to the government. Bryza underscored the importance of the parliamentary election to Georgia's future. Gamkrelidze responded that Saakashvili must understand and accept that if parliamentary elections are truly fair, he won't get a majority.

Comment

¶18. (C) Comment: Usupashvili and Gamkrelidze were both apologetic for the recent public vilification directed toward DAS Bryza. Both were somber and serious in their analysis of the current situation as quite dangerous. Usupashvili has advised the Ambassador that he is unsure how long the UNC can hold together. Still, the UNC and Gamkrelidze independently agreed on the mechanisms (CEC, TV, Courts, and Police) they believe the UNM used to control the election outcome.

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Equally noticeable was the opposition's agreement that "everything" is dependent on the parliamentary elections being truly fair. If they are not, all parties predicted worse trouble will come. End comment.

¶19. (U) DAS Bryza has cleared this cable.

TEFFT